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II. AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

The following listing of claims replaces all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

1. (Currently Amended) A computer implemented method for processing a data set, comprising the steps of:

providing a data set having a first length;

formatting a key to match the first length;

setting pre-determined bits of the formatted key to zero to yield a masked key; and

forming an exclusive-OR result of the data set with the masked key to yield an encrypted data set,

wherein the first length may be any length.

2. (Original) The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of replacing the data set with the encrypted data set.

3. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the first length comprises four high order bits and four low order bits.

4. (Original) The method of claim 3, wherein the forming step yields an encrypted data set in which only the four low order bits are encrypted.

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5. (Original) The method of claim 3, wherein the setting step comprises setting the four high order bits to zero.

6. (Original) The method of claim 5, wherein the step of setting the four high order bits to zero comprises forming an AND result of the truncated key with binary 0000 1111.

7. (Original) The method of claim 1, further comprising decrypting the encrypted data set by forming an inverse exclusive-OR result of the encrypted data set with masked key.

8. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the forming step yields an encrypted data set that is entirely within the ASCII printable range.

9. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the step of formatting a key comprises:

providing a second data set having a second length;

replicating the second data set as necessary until its length is equal to or greater than the first length; and

truncating the second data set as necessary until its length equals the first length.

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